**Working Paper No. 38**

# UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY IN AFRICA: A FIRST CUT

by Robert Mattes

**A comparative series of national public attitude surveys on democracy, markets and civil society in Africa.**

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AFROBAROMETER WORKING PAPERS

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by Robert Mattes

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# UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY IN AFRICA:
# A FIRST CUT

While social identity may be the cause and consequence of a wide range of political phenomena,[1] two of the most important consequences are the stability of political regimes in general, and the prospects for consolidating democratic regimes in particular. With this in mind, this chapter summarises a wide range of previously unpublished data from South Africa and 10 other African countries to address a few important questions. Aside from the self-interested assertions of political leaders and self-proclaimed group representatives, what is the actual state of social identity in South Africa? Have there been any tangible shifts in identity since the inception of its new democracy? Is identity in Africa necessarily dominated by racial and ethnic loyalties, or do other identifications play an important role? What can South Africans learn from the rest of Africa about identity?

Although identity in South Africa and across the continent has been the subject of much discussion over the years, empirical evidence has been extremely scant. To assess these matters, we turn to representative attitudes survey conducted in South Africa since 1994 by the Institute for Democracy In South Africa (I*d*asa), as well as an original set of data from a large-scale cross-national research project called the Afrobarometer. The data reviewed in this chapter come from systematic surveys of random, stratified, nationally representative samples in 11 African states, seven in Southern Africa (Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe), two in East Africa (Tanzania and Uganda) and two in West Africa (Mali and Nigeria), all conducted between July 1999 and September 2001.[2] Finally, a caveat is in order about our ability to generalize. Each country sample was drawn independently and randomly to represent voting age populations.[3] The 11 countries reported on here are largely English speaking, and all have recently undergone political transitions to multiparty systems (with the exception of Uganda) and are not fully representative of sub-Saharan Africa. We cannot infer the findings of this paper to francophone Africa, to the continent's remaining authoritarian regimes, or to states imploding through civil war. Though the short hand term "Africans" may often be used, we have a more limited populace in mind.

**Why Is Social Identity Politically Important?**

One of the most prominent features of Europe's "scramble for Africa" was the division and recombination of existing identity groups by colonial mapmakers into new, diverse and highly artificial political communities, or nations. A great deal of scholarship has subsequently focused on the dangers of such social diversity and the possibilities of transforming or transcending this diversity. These identities were often presumed to be primordial in nature, and thus strong and relatively fixed, and to pose significant obstacle to post-independence leaders' attempts to develop new overarching national identities.[4] People were thought to identify first and foremost with their primordial social or solidity group and only secondarily, if at all, with the post-independence national political entity.[5] To the extent that they coexisted, scholars tended to see them in tension with one another, if not mutually exclusive. In other words, the more citizens identified with some sub-national solidity group, the less they would identify with the overarching national political community.[6] The consequent lack of national identity would rob newly independent states of the necessary "political glue," turning every element of political conflict into zero-sum group-based conflict, and threatening the very stability of the new polity.

Beyond political stability, diverse social identities have also been seen to limit the prospects for the consolidation of a democratic type of political system.[7] This is because democracy presumes at least some prior agreement on the identity of the nation or "the people" that are to govern themselves democratically. While democracy allows people to govern their own affairs, it cannot tell us which

people should be included in or excluded from the process of ruling themselves within a given political unit. To paraphrase Ernst Gellner, democracy cannot tell us "who chooses the choosers?"[8]

Sharing many of these basic presumptions, Africa's post-independence leaders tended to see the ethnic, religious and racial diversity contained within their new states as a threat to their very stability (and ironically, often used this as an excuse to curtail multiparty competition). Many embarked upon projects of aggressive "nation building" to inculcate psychological affinities between newly defined citizens and the political territories in which they lived, and to break down older, more traditional identifications. They used a wide range of policies, from imposing a national language, to creating new national symbols and holidays, to fostering new values through school curriculum and state media. Yet many scholars have warned repeatedly of the near impossibility of building national identity, generally arguing that such attempts amount to no more than "jacobinist" impositions of the values, symbols and culture of the politically dominant group on the rest of society.[9] South Africa has certainly not been immune to these debates.[10]

**Evidence From South Africa**

At the root of the *apartheid* project was a sustained attempt to manipulate social identities and create new ones. Many scholars predicted that the racial and ethnic identities created and imposed by the *apartheid* system either were rejected by most South Africans or would be quickly jettisoned with the advent of democracy.[11] Others, however, warned that the consequences of 40 years of social engineering would not be dismissed so easily. *Apartheid* would leave a heavy imprint on social identities that would constrain the future development of democracy.[12]

In this section, we examine evidence about the type and extent of social identities in South Africa, as well as the salience with which they are held. To what extent do South Africans still identify, six years into their new non-racial democracy, with identities imposed or encouraged by the *apartheid* regime? Are social identities widely diverse or consensual? How have they changed, if at all, since 1994? Finally, do they detract from or contribute toward a widespread acceptance of the political entity called South Africa, an acceptance of one's place in South Africa, and pride in South African citizenship?

Based on Henri Tajfel's definition of social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership,"[13] we asked respondents in the 2000 Afrobarometer survey to tell us, besides being South African, which social group they belonged to first and foremost (the actual wording can be found under Table 1). We then asked them a set of questions designed to assess the extent to which they saw these identities as meaningful to their lives. The evidence shows that six years into their new democracy, substantial proportions of South Africans still identified themselves in terms of *apartheid* type categories. In July-September 2000, one-fifth (20 percent) chose an explicit apartheid racial identity: 12 percent said "black," 5 percent "coloured," 3 percent "Indian," 2 percent "white," and another 1 percent simply answered that they thought of themselves in terms of race. Another 9 percent answered "African," which in the South African context is generally used to connote "black," and another 1 percent called themselves "black African."

Another one-fifth (20 percent) chose a linguistic or ethnic identity. Seven percent said "Zulu," 5 percent "Xhosa," 2 percent "Setswana or Tswana," and 1 percent each chose "Afrikaner," "Sesotho or Sotho," "Swazi," "Boer" and "English." However 16 percent chose a religious category, with 13 percent thinking of themselves primarily as "Christian," 2 percent as a "religious person," and 1 percent each as "Moslem," and "Catholic."

***Table 1. Social Identity In South Africa, 2000***

| | Total | Black | White | Coloured | Indian |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Christian | 13 | 13 | 8 | 18 | 4 |
| Black | 12 | 17 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| African | 9 | 13 | <1 | 1 | 0 |
| Zulu | 7 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Middle Class | 7 | 2 | 32 | 7 | 1 |
| Ordinary person | 6 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 4 |
| Xhosa | 5 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Coloured | 5 | 0 | 0 | 46 | 0 |
| Working Class | 4 | 2 | 14 | 7 | 4 |
| Indian | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 69 |
| Setswana / Tswana | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| White | 2 | 0 | 13 | 0 | 0 |
| Religious | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| Muslim | 1 | 0 | <1 | 4 | 8 |
| Catholic | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Black African | 1 | 1 | <1 | 0 | 0 |
| In terms of race | 1 | 1 | <1 | 0 | 0 |
| Afrikaner | 1 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Sesotho | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Boer | 1 | <1 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| English | 1 | <1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Swazi | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Poor | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| Worker | 1 | 1 | <1 | 1 | 0 |
| Student | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| In terms of political party | 1 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Don't Differentiate Self | <1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Other | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Nothing | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Refused | <1 | 0 | <1 | 0 | 0 |

(2000 Afrobarometer) *We have spoken to many South Africans and they have all described themselves in different ways. Some people describe themselves in terms of their language, religion, or race, and others describe themselves in economic terms, such as working class, middle class, or a farmer. Besides being South African, which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?*

We can also look to I*d*asa surveys dating back to 1994 to assess whether these patterns differ substantially from those found immediately after the country's first open democratic election. While the 1994 and 1995 questions differ in important ways from the questions used in 1997 and 2000 (see the bottom of Table 2), it does appear that there has been a significant drop in the proportion holding racially-based social identities, and marked increases in those adopting religious, class and occupational identities (see Table 3). Yet as important as these trends may be, racial and ethnic loyalties are still the most prevalent sources of identity in South Africa.

***Table 2. Social Identity In South Africa (1994-2000)***

| | 1994 | 1995 | 1997 | 2000l |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| South African | 13 | 22 | NA* | NA |
| *Religion* | | | | |
| Christian | 2 | 1 | 6 | 13 |
| Religious | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Muslim | <1 | <1 | 1 | 1 |
| Catholic | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Other Religions | <1 | <1 | 4 | <1 |
| *Race* | | | | |
| Black | 14 | 16 | 16 | 12 |
| Coloured | 5 | 4 | 5 | 5 |
| White | 14 | 5 | 3 | 2 |
| Black African | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| In terms of race | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| *Continental* | | | | |
| African | 2 | 4 | 5 | 9 |
| Asian | 0 | <1 | 2 | <1 |
| *Language / Tribe* | | | | |
| Zulu | 7 | 8 | 12 | 7 |
| Xhosa | 1 | 2 | 6 | 5 |
| Indian | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Setswana / Tswana | 1 | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| Afrikaner / Afrikaans | 4 | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| Sesotho | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 |
| Boer | <1 | <1 | <1 | 1 |
| English | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| Swazi | 2 | <1 | 3 | 1 |
| Tsonga / Shangaan | 2 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| Ndebele | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Sepedi | 2 | 2 | 5 | <1 |
| Venda | 1 | 1 | 1 | <1 |
| *Class* | | | | |
| Middle Class | 0 | <1 | 4 | 7 |
| Working Class | <1 | <1 | 2 | 4 |
| Poor | 0 | 0 | <1 | 1 |
| Worker | 0 | 0 | <1 | 1 |
| *Occupation* | | | | |
| Occupation | 0 | <1 | <1 | <1 |
| Student | 0 | 0 | <1 | 1 |
| *Region* | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| *Party Affiliation* | 0 | 0 | <1 | 1 |
| *Personal: Ordinary Person* | 1 | 1 | <1 | 6 |
| *Other* | 1 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| *Nothing* | 1 | 3 | <1 | 2 |
| *Don't Differentiate Self* | 0 | 0 | 0 | <1 |
| *Refused* | 0 | 0 | <1 | <1 |

(1994 and 1995 Idasa)*: "In terms of culture, history and language, do you belong to a distinctive community (with its own distinctive culture and history)?" IF YES: To which community do you belong? IF NO "How would you describe yourselves in one or two words."*

(1997 Idasa) "*We have spoken to many people and they have all described themselves in different ways. Some people describe themselves in terms of their language, for example Swazi, Zulu or Sotho. Other people describe themselves according to their religion such as Methodist or Jewish. Still other people describe themselves in terms of their race, for example Asian or black, and some people describe themselves as working class, middle class or upper class. Thinking about yourself, which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?"*

(2000 Afrobarometer, see Table 1)

*Four percent still offered this response in 1997 despite the question wording.

***Table 3: Social Identity in South Africa, by Category, 1994-2000***

| | 1994 | 1995 | 1997 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Race | 33 | 24 | 24 | 22 |
| Language | 24 | 27 | 45 | 20 |
| Religion | 4 | 3 | 13 | 16 |
| Class / Occupation | <1 | 1 | 7 | 14 |
| Partisan | 0 | 0 | <1 | 1 |
| Continental | 2 | 4 | 7 | 9 |
| Regional | 0 | 4 | <1 | 0 |
| Nothing / Won't Differentiate / Refuse | 1 | 3 | <1 | 3 |

But are these identities mere labels, or are they relevant to people's lives? Since 1997, I*d*asa has presented respondents with six statements about their group identity and asked them to agree or disagree with each. Subsequent analysis, however, has suggested that these six items actually tap two different, though related aspects of group identity. The first three statements measure one's personal group identity (Table 4), and the second set of statements tap a different, though related sense of group chauvinism (Table 5).

The results reveal a fairly strong level of personal attachment to these group identities. In 2000, 92 percent of South Africans said that being a member of their identity group made them "feel proud," and 90 percent agreed that being a member of that group was a "very important part of how you see yourself," while 84 percent said that they would want their children to think of themselves in these terms. A comparison of these responses with those from 1997 reveals no clear trends of either increases or decreases in the extent of group identity.

***Table 4: Strength of Personal Group Identity, 1997-2000***

| | 1997 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|
| It makes you feel proud to be a ____. | 83 | 92 |
| Being ___ is a very important part of how you see yourself. | 89 | 90 |
| You would want your children to think of themselves as _____. | 86 | 84 |

As noted above, the second set of items measures a sense of chauvinism, or exceptionalism, associated with one's group. In 2000, three-quarters (73 percent) of South Africans said that they felt "much closer" to members of their identity group than to other South Africans. Sixty-four percent said that "of all the groups in South Africa" their group was "the best." And 49 percent felt that members of their group were "very different from other South Africans." One clear and important implication of this is that, for many people, it is quite possible to hold strong loyalties to one's group, yet to do so in a way that is not necessarily chauvinistic or exclusive. Again, a comparison of these responses with those from 1997 reveals no clear trends of either increasing or decreasing levels of group chauvinism.

***Table 5: Sense of Group Chauvinism, 1997-2000***

| | 1997 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|
| You feel much closer to ____ s than other South Africans. | 78 | 73 |
| Of all the groups in South Africa, ____s are the best. | 56 | 64 |
| ____ people are very different from other South Africans. | 49 | 49 |

*% agree / strongly agree*

If South Africans exhibit apparently strong attachments to their sub-national group identities, does this detract from the creation of a widely shared sense of national identity? The results presented in Table 6 suggest the answer is emphatically "no." South Africans exhibit extremely high levels of national identity. In 2000, 90 percent said it made them "proud to be called South African," 89 percent agreed that "being South African is an important part of how they see" themselves, and an identical 89 percent say they would want their children to think of themselves as South African.

***Table 6: Strength of National Identity (1995-2000)***

| | 1995 | 1997 | 1998 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| It makes you proud to be called a South African. | 91 | 94 | 91 | 90 |
| Being South Africa is an important part of how you see yourself. | NA | 91 | 90 | 89 |
| You would want your children to think of themselves as South African. | NA | NA | 92 | 89 |

*% agree / strongly agree*

When this data is viewed over time (Table 6), and broken down by race (Table 7), we see that levels of national identity among black South Africans have remained constant since 1995. However, there have been important declines among white, coloured and Indian respondents.

***Table 7: Strength of National Identity, by Race***

| | 1995 | 1997 | 1998 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Proud to be called South African** | | | | |
| Black | 93 | 95 | 95 | 94 |
| White | 87 | 85 | 73 | 75 |
| Coloured | 94 | 92 | 95 | 87 |
| Indian | 92 | 89 | 84 | 84 |
| **Being South African Important Part of How You See Yourself** | | | | |
| Black | - | 91 | 93 | 91 |
| White | - | 85 | 73 | 76 |
| Coloured | - | 93 | 94 | 89 |
| Indian | - | 97 | 84 | 78 |
| **Want Children to Think of Themselves as South African** | | | | |
| Black | - | - | 94 | 92 |
| White | - | - | 77 | 75 |
| Coloured | - | - | 96 | 93 |
| Indian | - | - | 89 | 85 |

*% agree / strongly agree*

While people seem to be in agreement about their personal commitment and loyalty to South Africa, to what extent do they hold an inclusive – or what might be called a "rainbow" – definition of that citizenship? Nine in ten (91 percent) agreed that all naturally born South Africans should receive equal treatment regardless of the group they belong to. However, only 85 percent agreed that it was desirable to try and build one united South Africa out of all the groups living in the country. An even smaller majority (77 percent) felt it was possible to do this.

***Table 8: Inclusive National Identity (1997-2000)***

| | 1997 | 1998 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|
| All people who were born in this country, regardless of what group they belong to, should be treated as equal citizens of South Africa. | NA | NA | 91 |
| People should realise we are South Africans first and stop thinking of themselves as Afrikaner, Zulu or whatever. | 82 | 89 | NA |
| It is desirable to create one united South African nation out of all the different groups who live in this country. | 83 | 86 | 85 |
| It is possible to create one united South African nation out of all the different groups who live in this country. | 67 | 75 | 77 |

*% Agree / Strongly Agree*

Disaggregating these data by race and over time reveals that whites are generally less likely than other South Africans to agree that people should stop thinking of themselves in group terms, less likely to support equal treatment for all regardless of group of origin, and less likely to feel that building one united nation is desirable or possible. At the same time, these differences should not be blown out of proportion. On all but one item, a majority of whites are supportive of these principles. Indeed, trends since 1997 suggest that white South Africans are becoming more, rather than less, supportive of a common nation-building project.

***Table 9: Inclusive National Identity, by Race***

| | 1997 | 1998 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Equal Treatment Regardless of Group** | | | |
| Black | - | - | 90 |
| White | - | - | 79 |
| Coloured | - | - | 98 |
| Indian | - | - | 96 |
| **People Should Think of Themselves as South Africans First** | | | |
| Black | 83 | 92 | - |
| White | 68 | 74 | - |
| Coloured | 90 | 96 | - |
| Indian | 79 | 92 | - |
| **Desirable to Create One United South African Nation** | | | |
| Black | 86 | 89 | 88 |
| White | 58 | 66 | 64 |
| Coloured | 94 | 91 | 95 |
| Indian | 88 | 91 | 95 |
| **Possible to Create One United South African Nation** | | | |
| Black | 72 | 82 | 82 |
| White | 32 | 41 | 44 |
| Coloured | 70 | 78 | 82 |
| Indian | 72 | 69 | 79 |

*% agree / strongly agree*

**Conclusions From South Africa**

This extremely cursory gallop through the data yields a few important generalizations. First, South Africa has achieved what is perhaps *the* irreducible prerequisite of political stability and democratic consolidation: that is, a near consensual agreement among citizens that the legally defined political community is the appropriate one, that they are indeed members of that community, and that they are

proud of that membership. This might seem obvious now, but key political analysts and commentators for years warned that there would be insufficient "glue" to hold the country together under a democratic dispensation.[14] Second, race and ethnicity remain an important source of social identity, but this tendency may be decreasing, with important and parallel increases in the likelihood with which South Africans adopt religious, class or occupational identities. Third, high levels of national identity and loyalty can coexist with equally high levels of identification with sub-national social identity groups. In other words, to the extent that there has been a nation-building project since 1994, it has succeeded not in transforming group identities into national identity (or of transferring loyalty from one to the other), but creating a transcendent national identity that overarches but coexists with group identities.

**Evidence From the Rest of Africa**

We now turn to evidence from the Afrobarometer in order to place South Africa into a larger continental perspective. We see important differences and parallels between South Africa and other African countries that in each instance run counter to what we might have expected. As with South Africa, the typical wisdom about identity in Africa has viewed it as almost wholly based on pre-modern, virtually primordial ethnic or tribal ties. Scholars often distinguish African politics on the very fact that "modern" identities such as those based on class or occupational categories have yet to develop.

Table 10 presents results for the question on social identity for 11 countries across Africa, including South Africa. In five countries, the most common source of identity was indeed ethnic, linguistic or tribal: Nigeria (48 percent), Namibia (45 percent), Mali (39 percent,) Malawi (38 percent) and South Africa (22 percent). Yet religion also plays an important role in Zambia (35 percent), Lesotho (27 percent), Malawi (26 percent), Mali (23 percent), Nigeria (21 percent) and South Africa (18 percent). It is not surprising that racial identities are held by significant proportions in the three former settler colonies: South Africa (20 percent), Namibia (12 percent) and Zimbabwe (12 percent).

But in contrast to common academic wisdom, occupational and class identities were the most frequent sources of identity in Tanzania (80 percent), Uganda (68 percent), Lesotho (60 percent), Zambia (48 percent) and Zimbabwe (38 percent). Even if one takes out occupational categories that could reflect more traditional identifications such as "farmer" or "fisherman," explicitly "class"-based identities are still quite extensive in Lesotho (29 percent), Zambia (23 percent) and Zimbabwe (19 percent). It is all the more noteworthy that explicit class-based identities are so relatively low in South Africa given that it is the most industrialized country on the continent with a thriving trade union movement. Thus while communal identities still feature prominently, the surprising frequency with which Africans call on economic or class identities challenges many assumptions about the supposed "primordialism" of African politics.

It may also surprise some that South Africans' high levels of group identity are not atypical. Most countries resemble South Africa in terms of very strong attachments to group identities (Table 11). Only Zimbabweans and Basotho stand out by according significantly lower levels of salience to their identities. Nor do South Africans corner the market with regard to group chauvinism: Nigerians are far more likely to see their group identities in chauvinist terms (Table 12).

***Table 10: Social Identity Across 11 Afrobarometer Countries***

| | Botswana | Lesotho | Malawi | Mali | Namibia | Nigeria | South Africa | Tanzania | Uganda | Zambia | Zimbabwe |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Continental | <1 | <1 | 1 | 0 | <1 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 | <1 | 1 |
| Linguistic / Ethnic / Tribal | 28 | 2 | 38 | 39 | 46 | 48 | 22 | 3 | 12 | 8 | 35 |
| Race | 3 | <1 | 1 | 0 | 12 | 0 | 20 | <1 | 0 | 5 | 12 |
| Region | 17 | 0 | 1 | <1 | 0 | 0 | <1 | <1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Religious | 5 | 27 | 26 | 23 | 6 | 21 | 18 | 4 | 8 | 35 | 8 |
| Occupation | 8 | 31 | 22 | 7 | 20 | 18 | 2 | 77 | 63 | 25 | 19 |
| Class | 2 | 29 | 5 | 16 | 16 | 10 | 14 | 3 | 5 | 23 | 18 |
| Gender | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | <1 | 0 | <1 | 8 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Personal | <1 | 4 | <1 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 3 | <1 | 2 | <1 | 0 |
| Party Affiliation | 3 | <1 | <1 | 0 | <1 | 0 | 1 | <1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Other | <1 | 1 | <1 | 6 | <1 | 0 | 8 | 4 | 1 | <1 | 0 |
| Won't differentiate | 32 | 1 | <1 | <1 | <1 | 0 | <1 | <1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Don't Know / Nothing | 2 | 4 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 |

*We have spoken to many [Zambians] and they have all described themselves in different ways. Some people describe themselves in terms of their language, religion, or race, and others describe themselves in economic terms, such as working class, middle class, or a farmer. Besides being [Zambian], which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost.*

***Table 11: Strength of Group Identity Across 10 Afrobarometer Countries***

| | Botswana | Lesotho | Malawi | Mali | Namibia | Nigeria | South Africa | Tanzania | Zambia | Zimbabwe |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| You feel proud to be _____. | 94 | 64 | 94 | 98 | 90 | 97 | 92 | 93 | 87 | 76 |
| You would want your children to think of themselves as ____. | 88 | 59 | 89 | -- | 82 | 90 | 84 | -- | 78 | 71 |

***Table 12: Strength of Group Chauvinism Across Eight Afrobarometer Countries***

| | Botswana | Lesotho | Malawi | Namibia | Nigeria | South Africa | Zambia | Zimbabwe |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Of all the groups in this country, _____ people are the best. | 50 | 56 | 46 | 62 | 80 | 64 | 55 | 50 |
| You feel much stronger ties to _____s than to other _____s. | 64 | 63 | 53 | 69 | 88 | 73 | 54 | 67 |

*(% "Strongly Agree / Agree")*

Finally, South Africans' very high levels of national identity are not atypical either (Table 13). In six of the seven countries where these questions were asked, majorities ranging from 89 to 97 percent stated that they were proud to be called a citizen of their country, and that they wanted their children to think of themselves as citizens of the country. In Zimbabwe, the proportions agreeing with these statements dropped to 84 and 78 percent respectively. Most of these countries also resemble South Africa with regard to the stated willingness to extend equal citizenship status to members of other groups, and the desire to create one united nation out of all people living in the country (Table 14). Lesotho was the exception with only seven-in-ten in agreement with these statements.

***Table 13: Strength of Personal National Identity Across Seven Afrobarometer Countries***

| | Botswana | Lesotho | Malawi | Namibia | South Africa | Zambia | Zimbabwe |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| It makes you proud to be called a _____. | 95 | 95 | 97 | 95 | 90 | 95 | 84 |
| You would want your children to think of themselves as _____. | 95 | 94 | 97 | 93 | 89 | 95 | 78 |

***Table 14: Sense of National Inclusiveness Across Seven Afrobarometer Countries***

| | Botswana | Lesotho | Malawi | Namibia | South Africa | Zambia | Zimbabwe |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All people who were born in this country, regardless of what group they belong to, should be treated as equal citizens of _____. | 88 | 72 | 92 | 87 | 91 | 87 | 88 |
| It is desirable to create one united _____ nation out of all the different groups who live in this country. | 85 | 71 | 94 | 82 | 85 | 90 | 92 |

*(% "Strongly Agree / Agree")*

Because of its potential importance, a final comment may be necessary with regard to these indicators of national identity. Given the broad levels of agreement with these indicators, one is tempted to disregard them as "motherhood" questions that tap attitudes so unobjectionable as to be meaningless, or that produce a "politically correct" answer that respondents think is socially desirable. Yet in many ways, this argument benefits from 20-20 hindsight. In lieu of such evidence, the past few decades of scholarship on African politics gives us little reason to expect such widespread agreement with these items. Furthermore, even if people are offering what they feel is a socially desirable response, it is noteworthy that they think that exhibiting a high degree of national identity is so desirable. Finally, while we have aggregated the "agree" and "strongly agree" responses in these tables, there are important variations in the proportions that choose each response and identify with the national political community at lukewarm rather than more intense levels. Research has shown that even though overall levels of national identity are widespread, the degree to which people possess more intense versus more lukewarm levels of national identity is an important predictor of South Africans' willingness to serve in the

country's military forces,[15] the emigration potential of skilled white South Africans,[16] and Africans' support for a democratic regime.[17]

**African Conclusions**

Six years ago, respected scholar of African politics David Welsh observed that to his knowledge:

> … in no single attested case since the proliferation of independent, ex-colonial states began after 1945, has "nation building," as a conscious attempt to detach people's loyalties from sub-national entities and focus them on a putative "nation," succeeded.[18]

While he is certainly correct about detaching loyalties from sub-national entities, what Welsh (and many others) failed to anticipate was that this was not a necessary part of creating new nations. While far from complete, this evidence suggests that the processes of post-independence nation-building have created coherent political communities with high levels of national identity in at least 11 African countries. As with South Africa, it appears that this national identity is a *transcendent* one, in that it bridges but coexists with high levels of group identity. And while we have no prior data for comparison, there is also evidence that in at least a handful of countries, a combination of political engineering and the processes of modernization have helped transform the nature of social identity away from tribe and language toward economic function and class.

## Endnotes

[1] For a review of possible causes and consequences, see Robert Mattes, "Hypotheses On Identity and Democracy: Community, Regime, Institutions and Citizenship," in Simon Bekker and Rachel Prinsloo, eds., *Identity? Theory, Politics, History* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1999).

[2] The Afrobarometer measures citizens attitudes toward democracy, markets and civil society. It is organized as an international collaborative network run by three core partners: the Institute for Democracy In South Africa (I*d*asa), the Centre for Democratic Development in Ghana (CDD-Ghana), and Michigan State University. The sample sizes were Botswana = 1200, Lesotho = 1177, Malawi = 1208, Mali = 2089, Namibia = 1183, Nigeria = 3603, South Africa = 2200, Tanzania = 2200, Uganda = 2271, Zambia = 1200 and Zimbabwe = 1200. The margin of sampling error averages plus or minus 2.5 percentage points for sample sixes of 1200, though it is smaller in South Africa, Uganda, and Tanzania, at 2.2 points each, and in Nigeria, at 2 points. Fieldwork was conducted by national research institutions affiliated with the Afrobarometer project. We are grateful for research funding from the National Science Foundation, United States Agency for International Development, Swedish International Development Agency and the Danish Trust Fund at the World Bank.

[3] Samples were designed using a common clustered, stratified, multi-stage, area probability design. Random selection methods were used at each stage, with probability according to population size whenever possible. Sampling frames were constructed in the first stages from the most up to data census data or projections available, and thereafter from census maps, systematic walk patterns, and project-generated lists of household members. With the exception of South Africa, each country sample was self-weighted and sufficiently representative of national characteristics on key socio-economic indicators (age, gender, region) that post-weighting was not necessary.

[4] Gabriel Almond reaches the same conclusions in considering the nation-building attempts of the Soviet Union; see *A Discipline Divided: Schools and Sects in Political Science* (London: Sage, 1990), pp. 150-152.

[5] See for example, Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale, 1977); and Walker Connor, "Ethnonationalism and Political Instability," in J. Gagiano and H. Giliomee, eds., *The Elusive Search for Peace: Israel, South Africa and Northern Ireland* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1990}.

[6] Connor, *op cit.*

[7] Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, "Toward Consolidated Democracies," *Journal of Democracy* 7/2 (April 1996).

[8] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983). See also Dankwart Rustow, "Transition to Democracy: Toward A Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politcs* 2 (1970); Dankwart Rustow, "Democracy: A Global Revolution?" *Foreign Affairs* (1990); and David Manent, "Democracy Without Nations," *Journal of Democracy* 8/2 (April 1997).

[9] Connor, op cit; Johan Degenaaar, "Beware of Nation-Building Discourse," in Nic Rhoodie and Ian Liebenberg, eds., *Democratic Nation Building In South Africa* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1994).

[10] For a review of these debates, see Robert Mattes, "Do Diverse Social Identities Inhibit Nationhood and Democracy?" in Mai Palmbert , ed., *National Identity and* Democracy *In Africa* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council / Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape/ Nordic Africa Institute, 1999), pp. 268-271. For examples of the various schools, see the essays in Nic J. Rhoodie and Ian Liebenberg eds., *Democratic National Building In South Africa* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1994).

[11] Heribert Adam, "Nationalism, Nation-Building and Non Racialism," in Nic Rhoodie and Ian Liebenberg, eds., *Democratic Nation Building In South Africa* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1994).

[12] Donald Horowitz, *A Democratic South Africa? Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[13] Henry Tajfel, "Social Categorisation, Social Identity, and Social Comparison," in H. Tajfel, ed., *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies In the Social Psychology of Inter-Group Relations* (London: Academic Press, 1978), p. 63, cited in Don Taylor and Fathali Moghaddam, *Theories of Intergroup Relations: International Social-Psychological Perspectives*, 2d. Ed (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994), p. 60.

[14] See Horowitz, *A Democratic South Africa?*

[15] Mattes, "Do Diverse Identities Inhibit Nationhood and Democracy?" pp. 277-278.

[16] Robert Mattes and Wayne Richmond, "What Do Skilled Africans Think," in J. Crush, ed., *Losing Our Minds: Skills Migration and the South African Brain Drain*, Migration Policy Series No. 18 (Cape Town: Idasa/Southern African Migration Project, 2000).

[17] Based on analysis by the author and Michael Bratton and E. Gyimah Boadi for a forthcoming book entitled *Public Opinion in Africa: Learning About Democracy and Market Reform* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[18] David Welsh, "The Making of the Constitution," in Hermann Giliomee, Lawrence Schlemmer and Sarita Hauptfleish , eds., *The Bold Experiment: South African's New Democracy* (Halfway House, SA: Southern Book Publishers, 1994), p. 88.